

# Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary



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**W**here the bayous and rivers of Southeast Louisiana meet the salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico lies America's best-kept secret: the Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary. The name itself is exotic, with "Barataria" referring to the impenetrability

encountered by early explorers, and "Terrebonne" giving away the heavy French influence in the naming of "the Good Earth." This 4.2 million-acre land of vast marshes, swamps, and bayous lies nestled between the mighty Mississippi and Atchafalaya Rivers, with the one-hundred mile long Bayou Lafourche separating the Barataria and Terrebonne Basins. It is a land of abundant wildlife, including alligators, bald eagles, furbearers, waterfowl and other migratory and resident birds. It has for thousands of years been a nursery ground for fish and shellfish. It is currently home to "Cajuns," Islenos, African Americans, Vietnamese, Germans, French and a host of other groups who have formed a "gumbo culture" that has thrived on the rich natural resources of this delta. It is also a land in peril, a unique and irreplaceable corner of the world that is disappearing before our eyes.

## **What is the National Estuary Program?**

The Barataria-Terrebonne Estuary is one of 28 estuaries nationwide that have been deemed nationally significant and have come under the umbrella of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) National Estuary Program (NEP). This innovative program recognizes that environmental problems encountered in watersheds are interconnected and cannot be treated in isolation from the others; and that the most effective means of restoring degraded or threatened estuaries and their watersheds is to use a holistic approach. This holistic approach utilizes the expertise of a wide variety of individuals and experts when looking at seemingly separate environmental problems. It also incorporates input from residents from all sectors of the watershed in creating and implementing a management plan for the area. Decisions are made through consensus, meaning that discussion takes place until a decision is reached that everyone can live with. Annual

funding for this program is provided by the EPA, and the individual program is required to contribute a 25% state or local match. The Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program (BTNEP), located on the campus of Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, is administered through the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality. The 25% match to the EPA grant is provided by the State of Louisiana General Fund.

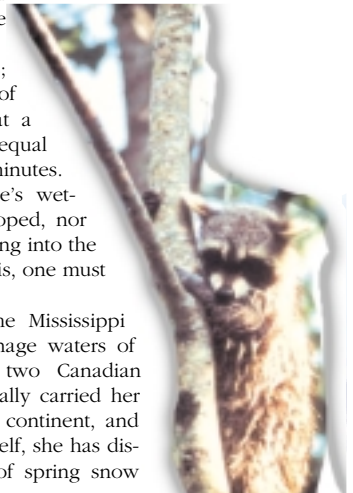
## **Problems of Barataria-Terrebonne**

In order to become a part of the NEP, a nominated area must be proven both nationally significant and threatened. Barataria-Terrebonne had no trouble proving either.

Estuarine systems, where freshwater from land meets and mixes with salty ocean waters, are known to be among the most biologically productive systems in the world, and Barataria-Terrebonne is no exception. Nearly one-fifth of the nation's estuarine-dependent fisheries, and thousands of resident and migratory birds rely on the diverse habitats of Barataria-Terrebonne. With substantial finfish, oysters, shrimp, and crabs, and annual commercial fisheries landings of more than \$220 million, these wetlands and bays are a mecca for both commercial and recreational fishermen alike, and they help to feed Louisiana and the nation. In addition, oil and gas-related industries located in the basins provide billions of dollars to the nation's economy. Agricultural activities, dominated by sugar cane, are also extremely important to the local economy.

The threats to this area are numerous; the foremost is land loss. The wetlands of Barataria-Terrebonne are disappearing at a rate of 25 square miles per year. That is equal to a football-field-sized area every 45 minutes. Unlike other regions, Barataria-Terrebonne's wetlands are not being filled in, not developed, nor paved over. They are subsiding and eroding into the Gulf of Mexico. In order to understand this, one must understand how this area was created.

Barataria-Terrebonne is a gift of the Mississippi River. The Mississippi receives the drainage waters of two-thirds of the United States and two Canadian provinces. The "Big Muddy" has historically carried her cargo of water and sediment across the continent, and upon reaching the shallow continental shelf, she has dispersed her load. In the annual cycles of spring snow



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